



IOWA DEPARTMENT FOR THE BLIND

SFY2027 PROPOSED BUDGET

March 2, 2026

Dear Representative Gehlbach and Members of the Education Appropriations Subcommittee:

On April 2, 2025, the Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB) proudly celebrated its Centennial. For 100 years, Iowa has been a national leader in equipping blind and low vision job-seekers with the training and tools they need to enter, remain, and advance in the workforce. This legacy would not have been possible without the continued support of the Governor's office, the Legislature, and the people of Iowa.

The Iowa Department for the Blind is funded through a federal-state partnership under the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) State Grants, authorized by the Rehabilitation Act and reauthorized through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Under federal regulations, the federal share of VR funding is 78.7 percent, with states required to provide the remaining 21.3 percent in non-federal match to access their full federal allotment. In practical terms, every dollar the State of Iowa invests in VR allows us to draw down nearly four dollars in federal support that pays for employment and independent living services that help blind and low-vision Iowans gain and maintain employment.

We are requesting \$250,000 in capital appropriations for the replacement of the chiller at the Iowa Department for the Blind building in downtown Des Moines. This upgrade will ensure a fully functioning and reliable system, enhancing efficiency and reducing annual utility costs.

We are very grateful to Governor Reynolds for recommending full funding of our proposed budget. We hope the Education Appropriations Subcommittee will support this recommendation as well, allowing the Iowa Department for the Blind to continue empowering blind Iowans to work, live independently, and pursue the lives they choose. As we enter our second century of service, the Iowa Department for the Blind looks forward to expanding opportunities for all Iowans.

Sincerely,

Stacy Cervenka
Director
Iowa Department for the Blind



IOWA DEPARTMENT FOR THE BLIND

AT A GLANCE

Mission

- Empowering blind Iowans to work, live independently, and pursue the lives they choose.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)

- Helps blind and low vision Iowans prepare for, obtain, retain, and advance in competitive employment. Services include career exploration, skills training, and job placement support. VR also houses the **Randolph-Sheppard Program**, which provides blind entrepreneurs training, resources, and support for starting their own businesses.

Education and Training

- Provides **Pre-Employment Transition Services** (Pre-ETS) for youth and skills training for adults.
- Summer Program: Eight weeks of summer programming for youth that focuses on blindness-specific skills and college and career readiness.
- **New! Monthly Weekend Youth Retreats**—Each month, IDB offers a weekend youth retreat in communities across Iowa that focuses on job exploration, workplace readiness, and work-based learning opportunities (volunteering).
- **New! Monthly 7-Day Adult Skills Retreats**—Each month, IDB offers a week-long retreat for blind and low vision adults in communities across Iowa that focuses on cane travel, braille, home management, and adaptive technology.

Efficiency—The Retreat Team, which is implementing both the youth and adult retreats, was previously staffing a program that utilized 8 employees to serve 2 students. These staff are now serving at least 25 retreat clients a month.

Adjustment to Blindness Center

- A comprehensive training program located in Des Moines. Students receive instruction in cane travel, braille, home management, technology, industrial arts, career readiness, job exploration, and work-based learning opportunities (volunteering, internships, and apprenticeships).

Savings—By housing students in the dormitories on our 5th and 6th floors instead of in offsite apartments, we were able to save approximately **\$70,000** in 2027 and **at least \$100,000** a year going forward.

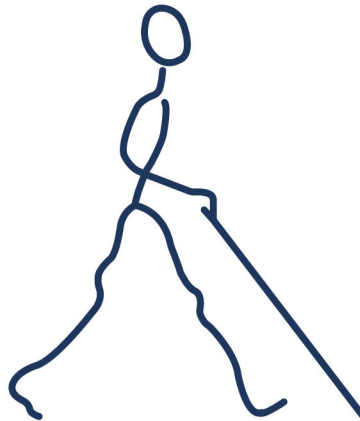
Independent Living Services

- Empowers older Iowans, homemakers, stay-at-home parents, and others who are not pursuing employment to live independently and stay active in their communities through individualized training and in-home support.

Iowa Library for the Blind and Print Disabled

- Provides braille, large print, and audio materials to Iowans of all ages who cannot use standard print. The Library also houses the **Instructional Materials Center**, which supplies accessible educational materials to students statewide.
- During the 2024–2025 school year, the IMC provided or transcribed a total of 891 accessible educational materials (braille and large print) for students across Iowa.

Savings—Of these 891 materials provided to Iowa students, 596 were checked out from the library collection, resulting in a cost savings of **\$387,485.07 for schools statewide**.



STRIDES IN SERVICE FOR EVERY AGE AND STAGE

The Iowa Department for the Blind is committed to advancing its agency programs to better serve Iowans at every stage of life. By leveraging all its initiatives, IDB ensures that individuals—ranging from our youngest clients to our seniors—can access vital resources, services, training, and programs centered on education, independence, and employment.

STUDENT-FOCUSED EDUCATION

Improve braille literacy among blind youth

- In FY25, the library circulated **307,955** books, magazines, audio players, and braille eReaders to over **5,800** lowans.



Provide innovative and proactive pre-employment transition services

- The Iowa Department for the Blind provided **33 programs** to pre-employment transition clients (ages 14-21).
- **84%** of pre-employment transition clients gained work experience prior to graduation.



YOUR BRAILLE AND LARGE
PRINT SOLUTION

Ensure students receive timely and accurate educational materials in alternative formats through the library and Instructional Materials Center (IMC)

- During the 2024-2025 school year, the IMC completed a total of **891 projects** in braille, large print, electronic braille, and print-braille.
- Of the 891 total projects, 596 were checked out from the library collection to students, saving schools **\$387,485.07 for the school year**.
- In 2024-2025, the IMC produced **37,320** total print pages.
- The ISASP Practice Assessments were added to the library collection in braille for Grades 2-5.

Ensure that older individuals who are losing vision have the skills and tools they need to remain independent in their homes

- In FY25, **1,775 older blind** individuals completed training objectives and exited the program.
- A total of **243 clients** were served in the Independent Living Program.

HIGHLY-SKILLED WORKFORCE

Improve blind lowan's ability to adapt to technological change in the workplace

Client Spotlight: Brian Gordon, Corn & Soybean Farmer



“Oh, I’m just more confident in general. Hands down. Any potential students thinking about doing the Center, don’t wait, just jump into it. If you stick to it, you will not regret it. It’s the best thing I’ve done since this has happened.”

Brian Gordon, a lifelong Iowa farmer, has been growing corn and soybeans since age 14. After a farming accident left him blind, Brian refused to give up the work he loved. His journey toward independence led him to the Iowa Department for the Blind, where he began training in 2024.

Initially hesitant, Brian soon embraced the Orientation Center’s hands-on learning –mastering skills in technology, cane travel, and even returning to the shop, where working with tools reminded him of life on the farm. Using apps like Be My Eyes and Seeing AI, Brian now stays connected and manages his daily farm tasks with confidence.

Reflecting on his experience, Brian says, “Oh, I’m just more confident in general. Hands down... It’s the best thing I’ve done since this has happened.” His journey shows that while change can feel overwhelming, the right tools, training, and support make it possible to keep doing the work you love.

Bring forward an underutilized pool of talented and motivated workers

Client Spotlight: Sterling McTee, Cyber Engineer



“For anyone who’s just starting out with the program, you may have a clear idea of what you’re trying to do right now, and that’s great, but there’s a lot more down the road if you’re open to it.”

Sterling McTee is a cyber engineer at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, where he’s worked for the past 10 months. He says the best part of his job is “the incredible people I get to work with every day.”

Sterling first connected with the Iowa Department for the Blind (IDB) when he was a freshman at Drake University. He began working with a counselor to explore his educational goals and the accommodations he might need to succeed. With IDB’s support, Sterling decided to continue his education and earned a master’s degree at Carnegie Mellon University. “The flexibility was fantastic, and it worked out really well that the department was able to help out,” he recalls.

Looking back, Sterling says his connection with the department expanded his sense of what was possible. Today, he is thriving in his field and advises new clients: “You may have a clear idea of what you’re trying to do right now, and that’s great, but there’s a lot more down the road if you’re open to it.”

Work with the WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) partners to make America’s Job Centers accessible to blind and otherwise disabled job seekers

- Providing resources and training to job centers to ensure they can assist all Iowans.

Increase the number of clients participating in post-secondary education and training

- In FY25, **76 clients** participated in post-secondary education/training.
- **85%** of participants experienced skill gains after participating in disability skills training.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY2025



2025 Iowa Regional Braille Challenge

Iowa PBS visited the 2025 Iowa Regional Braille Challenge and did a segment on the Braille Challenge for their Iowa Life program. Through heartwarming interviews and live footage of the event, audiences are able to witness the hard work, passion, and excitement that fuel the Braille Challenge each year.

Scan the QR code to watch!



Iowa Department for the Blind Centennial Slideshow

On April 2, 2025, the Department celebrated its Centennial Anniversary. Learn about how the Iowa Department for the Blind was established, developed, and expanded into what it is today!

Scan the QR code to watch!



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